

12th Annual Social Justice Book and Lecture

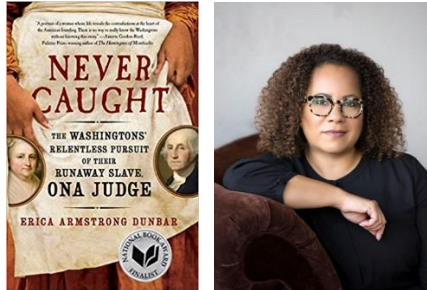
Fall Semester, 2018

Never Caught: The Washington's' Relentless Pursuit of their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge

By Erica Armstrong Dunbar

Finalist for the National Book Award for Nonfiction

Lecture: October 9, 2018



Book Summary

A startling and eye-opening look into America's First Family, *Never Caught* is the powerful story about a daring woman of "extraordinary grit" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*).

When George Washington was elected president, he reluctantly left behind his beloved Mount Vernon to serve in Philadelphia, the temporary seat of the nation's capital. In setting up his household he brought along nine slaves, including Ona Judge. As the President grew accustomed to Northern ways, there was one change he couldn't abide: Pennsylvania law required enslaved people be set free after six months of residency in the state. Rather than comply, Washington decided to circumvent the law. Every six months he sent the slaves back down south just as the clock was about to expire.

Though Ona Judge lived a life of relative comfort, she was denied freedom. So, when the opportunity presented itself one clear and pleasant spring day in Philadelphia, Judge left everything she knew to escape to New England. Yet freedom would not come without its costs. At just twenty-two-years-old, Ona became the subject of an intense manhunt led by George Washington, who used his political and personal contacts to recapture his property.

- Simon and Schuster

Chapter Discussion Questions

Chapter 1

1. Martha Washington loses her 17 year-old daughter, Patsy Custis, to illness and later loses another child, Frances. Dunbar describes how devastating the loss of a child affected Martha and George Washington. The marriage between Martha and George meant that

their wealth and property would be merged. Betty, Martha's favorite slave, had given birth to multiple children including Ona Judge and Dunbar explains that enslaved mothers often worried that their children would be "bartered for gold" and sold away. Compare the two experiences of mothers losing children in the 18th century. How do you imagine Martha felt about the child loss of her enslaved mothers? How might Betty and other enslaved mothers feel about Martha losing her children?

2. On page 10 Dunbar states that planters often complained about white indentured servants as being unreliable, lazy and likely to try and escape, and relied mostly on slave labor. How does this impact your impression of the planter's preference for enslavement?
3. In Dunbar's description of Andrew Judge (10-12), she attempts to present an alternate, perhaps more optimistic, storyline about his relationship with Ona Judge and their child, stating that; they could have been in love, that he could have tried to purchase her and their child, and that he tried to help her escape, but failed. She also presents the facts; that she was enslaved, that Andrew was a white man who held power, that he had a child with Ona, that he left Mount Vernon without them. Why does Dunbar do this? How do you interpret these facts?

Chapter 2

1. Page 18 and 19 describe the concerns on the mind of both George Washington and the seven slaves, including Ona Judge, as they leave for New York from Mount Vernon. Compare and contrast the concerns of both Washington and the slaves. How do you think Washington felt about the concerns of the slaves? How might the slaves have felt about the concerns of George Washington? How does empathizing with humanity influence the ability to consider and value the needs of others?
2. Page 26 discusses William Lee's evolution from "Billy" -or being referred to as "*My boy Billy*"- to William and claiming the surname Lee. What considerations might have motivated William to make these changes? What were the benefits or costs to doing so?
3. Page 28 addresses Washington's need for his slaves to be well dressed. What considerations motivated Washington's mindset?

Chapter 3

1. In the beginning of the chapter Dunbar describes the experience of a runaway slave named Molly who is constantly "looking over her shoulder for kidnappers or officials of the law..." (p.33). She writes, "It was his [the constable] responsibility to arrest men and women who stole themselves from bondage and to make certain that human property was restored to its rightful owner" (p. 34). How might this kind of rule of law impact free blacks in the North? What connections can you see with current day strategies of policing black people and immigrants?
2. How would you describe Ona Judge's transition from Mount Vernon to New York? How does her transition compare to Martha's? What pieces of evidence do you have to support this description and comparison?
3. On page 42 Dunbar writes "Slave ownership was still a sign of upper-class status..." in New York City. How might the ownership of enslaved black people impact the sentiment

of non-slave holding, poor whites? How might this kind of status symbol impact the anti-slavery work of political and religious groups at the time, or, more generally, the end of slavery?

Chapter 4

1. Page 53 discusses how Washington would not tolerate the unkempt appearance of white servants and instead brought more slaves with them to Philadelphia. What role did the symbolism of wealth play in this decision? What benefits (and costs) did choosing slaves over white servants give the Washingtons? How did this impact local white servants as well as the additional slaves brought to Philadelphia?
2. At the bottom of page 53, the book describes the skills of the enslaved cook, Hercules. How was Hercules able to use his skills too afford himself and his family privileges that other slaves did not have? What were the tradeoffs of these privileges? Did his skills ultimately impact how his humanity was valued?
3. Pages 56-58 talks about the need for privacy. Why was privacy not only desired but utilized for safety? Compare and contrast what privacy meant to both the Washingtons and the slaves.

Chapter 5

1. What do you know about the states of New York and Pennsylvania and their relationship to slavery? Why do the laws about slavery differ in these states considering these are both northern states? How does this change your view of what it means to be a northern versus southern state?
2. How might you interpret Washington's rationalization to keep his slaves despite the laws, which prohibit slavery in Philadelphia? What do you think prevents him from viewing his slaves as worthy of freedom even in Pennsylvania?
3. In what ways are Hercules's relationship with the Washingtons different? Does Hercules have more or less to lose in pursuing his freedom? Pg 71.

Chapter 6

1. Chapter six opens by describing a theatrical production full of irreverent innuendo and racy scenes. Compare and contrast how the Washingtons and the enslaved related to the play. How can storytelling and humor land on audience members so differently? How does that relate to other aspects of their lives?
2. What influence might the free black leaders and the overall Free African Society have had on Ona Judge? How did it influence not only her life trajectory, but also her mental and emotional mindset? What do you think life would have been like if she had not met these leaders?
3. Chapter 6 wrestles with the considerations Ona Judge had on her decision to escape slavery and the many potential costs for doing so. What aspects influenced Ona's potential outcomes (ie: gender, current and potential living conditions, relationships, present and potential threats to safety etc.) and how might this have been similar or

different to slaves who were not controlled by the Washingtons? How might she prioritize these considerations to make a decision?

Chapter 7

1. Dunbar makes frequent interpretations of how the enslaved think and feel and their motivations for certain behavior. For example, on page 93, she states that “Judge thought long and hard about her seven-year residency in the North, and the thought of returning to Mount Vernon was not an easy sell.” Why might Dunbar make these kinds of interpretations with the enslaved people in the text? How is this different than how she interprets the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of the Washington’s and their white associates?
2. What is the significance of Thomas Law’s biracial children in this story? Judge is also biracial. How might this impact the potential relationship between the two?
3. What are the factors that might contribute to Judge’s sentiments about her old home at Mount Vernon? What might she gain or lose by going back?

Chapter 8

1. Chapter 8 opens with a copy of the wanted ad taken out when Ona escaped. It highlights Ona’s access to clothes, her appearance, and a \$10 monetary reward. How would this ad be similar or different to potential ads taken out on slaves not owned by the Washingtons? How might this ad impact Ona’s escape?
2. Pages 100-103 discuss the grueling experience of escaping slavery and the differences between the experience for men and women. What systems of oppression further influenced the process of attempting to escape slavery?
3. Pages 104-105 cover the consequences experienced by “difficult” slaves, both selling the slaves as well as physical violence to the slaves. What impact (mental, emotional, and physical) would these action have on not only the “difficult” slaves themselves, but to all slaves who witnessed/were aware of the actions taken against their peers?

Chapter 9

1. We know very little about Ona Judge’s true experience during her fast escape in May 1796. What do we know for fact? What is conjecture? What else could you imagine the planning and actual journey might have been like for Ona?
2. Dunbar states that the town of Portsmouth had an incredibly small black population- some enslaved and others free? Do you think this works to Judge’s advantage or disadvantage? In what other ways is Portsmouth different than the other places Judge had lived?
3. Dunbar describes the grueling and dangerous work of domestic labor. In what ways are black domestic labor similar and/or different from the labor of the enslaved? In what ways is this life different for Ona?

Chapter 10

1. Pages 127-129 highlights Ona's experience as a domestic worker and as a free woman/fugitive slave. What are the differences that she experienced? How does this compare to her previous life? What challenges still existed?
2. Page 129 reminds us of how Ona Judge had to exist in order to not be caught. How would that influence her days, relationships, health, and opportunities?
3. Pages 133 and 134 focus on how the Langdons envisioned themselves as "good" slave owners, which led to them not understanding why Ona Judge would want to leave the Washingtons. Discuss the relationship between good intentions versus actual impact.

Chapter 11

1. Washington led Americans as the Commander in the Revolutionary War because he believed that Americans should be free from British rule. As a former president, he was well aware of the growing sentiment that human bondage was immoral, particularly given the recent legal changes in some northern cities that made slavery illegal. Given his dedication to making America a free nation and his awareness of the growing anti-bondage sentiment, what do you imagine contributes to Washington's continued relentless pursuit of Ona, his enslaved?
2. What do you think about the methods that Washington used to recapture Ona Judge? How do his methods reflect his respect of government and law?
3. According to Dunbar, Joseph Whipple believes that he is offering Ona a fair compromise (p 145), return to the Washington's and he will negotiate her freedom upon their death. He then trusts her to make her own way to the docks when called upon to return to Virginia. Why do you think Whipple trusts Ona to uphold this agreement?
4. How does the treatment of Ona Judge as an ignorant and dependent slave by white people work to Ona's advantage or disadvantage?

Chapter 12

1. Chapter 12 reflects on the need for both white and black women to have a spouse for protection and survival (page 156). What aspects of protection and survival are obtained by gaining a husband and how did those benefits differ between white and black women? What would happen if women abstained from the institution of marriage? Why was there power with regards to being male? How does that compare to today?
2. Page 159 touches on the care that Ona Judge and Jack Staines took to obtain a legal marriage. It was thwarted by Washington's proxy – Whipple, who intervened. Given the former presidents' role to uphold and enact the will of the people and create a free nation, discuss this contradiction of intervening in Judge's right to be married at a time when anti-bondage was becoming so popular that he also was trying to hide his own actions to recapture Ona Judge.
3. Several times throughout the book it is highlighted how similar Ona Judge's life is to women in the Washington family. Pages 161-163 highlight this again with the births of two daughters named Eliza. Discuss the likely similarities and differences in both mothers' pregnancies as well as giving birth to their daughters.

Chapter 13

1. On page 173 Dunbar states that Washington “had indeed struggled with the concept of slavery.” What is her evidence of this? Do you believe that he struggled with the concept of slavery? What evidence do you have to support your belief?
2. According to Dunbar, the manumission of George Washington’s slaves after his death caused a lot of anxiety for his widow, Martha Washington. What do you think of Martha’s decision making about the future of her enslaved? What factors did she consider? What should she have considered?
3. Dunbar describes the incredible struggles that Ona Staines and her family endured in poverty after Jack Staines’ presumed death. How does this part of her story explain Ona’s true sentiments about her own enslavement or that of her children?

Epilogue

1. The epilogue compares the lives of Ona and her sister Philadelphia, as well as highlights the cost of escaping from slavery for family members that were left behind as well as their hopefulness about their own lives. What were the tradeoffs for Ona and Philadelphia?
2. William Costin is spoken about throughout the epilogue. It’s acknowledged that he has quite a lot of power given the family he is born into. What platform and responsibility does he have to use his influence to improve conditions for the black community?